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January 14, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

MORI C03235364

FROM: *QW* Phil Odeen/John Negroponte

SUBJECT: Updated Vietnam Assessment

The SRG meeting on Monday, January 17, will address the current situation in South Vietnam and the prospects for CY 72.

Purpose of the Meeting

NSC, NSA, OSD, USAF, ARMY reviews completed.

I think you should have three purposes in this meeting:

-- To review the assessment of the situation in South Vietnam developed by the VSSG. Since a rough consensus exists among the agencies, you should probe their view to see if it is sound.

-- To determine what actions, if any, should be taken immediately to deal with the problems raised by this assessment. In particular, you will want to see if any further steps can be taken to prepare for an enemy offensive in MR-2.

-- To obtain agreement on the additional analysis required before further action can be taken. A number of long term problems exist, particularly regarding RVNAF improvement, that will need to be dealt with. Options should be developed.

The discussion of these issues will be based on two studies recently completed by the VSSG.

-- A CIA assessment of enemy strategy and capabilities through the 1971-72 Dry Season.

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-- In North Laos, they may move westward from Long Tieng, harrass but probably not take Louangphrabang, and otherwise keep friendly forces on the defensive.

-- In South Laos, they may put pressure on Pakse and other river towns, but CIA does not believe direct assaults are likely; control of the Bolovens will be consolidated and friendly forces kept well away from infiltration routes.

-- In Cambodia, the enemy has a wide range of options; he will probably take additional territory and may even temporarily take a provincial capital, but a direct assault on Phnom Penh is unlikely.

-- In Vietnam, widespread main force operations are not expected partly because enemy forces are deployed in Cambodia and Laos. There will, however, be widespread harrassment and probably a major offensive in the Western Highlands of MR-2. Enemy combat strength in Western MR-2 is increasing from 10,000 to 30,000 with the deployment of the 320th NVA division to the area. Some offensive action south of the DMZ is also possible.

The enemy is expected to engage in four types of action in Vietnam:

-- The usual seasonal upsurge in terrorism, guerrilla attacks and small actions against LOCs.

-- Shelling and rocketing and some sapper attacks on cities including Saigon.

-- A publicity-seeking effort to take and hold temporarily a provincial capital or two, most likely Kontum in the MR-2 Western Highlands.

-- An attempt to route a major ARVN unit or siege a fire support base, probably in Western MR-2 or Northern MR-1.

There is no evidence, therefore, to support the view that the NVA will undertake a nationwide military offensive in South Vietnam. Over the next month, however, this picture could change rapidly if infiltration, particularly of NVA units were increased significantly, even though it is clearly the judgment of the intelligence community that North Vietnam will not make the effort required.

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The Main Force Situation

Given this enemy threat, it is comforting that the main force situation has not deteriorated over the last year despite continuing U. S. withdrawals. In particular,

-- According to the CIA, total VC/NVA combat forces in SVN and Cambodia are roughly the same strength now that they were in December 1970 though there have been increases in Cambodia and MR-2.

-- The RVNAF combat forces have declined slightly in overall strength. Together with ROK and U. S. withdrawals, the net reduction in free world strength will be 190,000 men by end January of which about 145,000 represented U. S. withdrawals.

With constant enemy and declining U. S. strength, the main force situation has shifted to the enemy's advantage since last spring though it should be clear that (see Table 1:)

-- The decline has not been severe. In total strength (including support) we now outnumber the NVA/VC forces by a 7 to 1 ratio compared to a 8 to 1 ratio last spring. Our combat forces are now about 2.9 times greater in size than the opposing forces though we had well over a 3 to 1 nation-wide advantage last spring.

-- The effects of the decline has been lessened by redeployment of forces into the areas where we were at a critical disadvantage. For example, in MR-1, the creation of a new division and introduction of nine battalions from the general reserve has meant that today we have about a 2 to 1 advantage in combat forces compared to the near parity forecast last spring.

For these reasons, we have fared better in the main force situation than we expected and continue to retain a significant strength advantage over the VC/NVA forces. Based on a U. S. residual force of 60,000 men by June 1972, the DOD assessment predicts that this generally optimistic outlook will prevail through June 1972, even though a further decline will be experienced in the force ratios.

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	<u>1 Dec 71 (Actual)</u>	<u>Mid-72 Projection</u>	
		<u>May Assessment^{a/}</u>	<u>Jan 72 Update^{b/}</u>
MR 1	2.1	0.6 - 0.8	1.4
MR 2	2.3	1.5 - 2.6	1.9
MR 3	6.2	3.2	5.4
MR 4	<u>2.8</u>	<u>3.2</u>	<u>2.8</u>
RVN	2.9	--	2.3

a/ MFR range projected against most probable threat (MR 1 offensive) and worst case (simultaneous MR 1 and 2 offensive). Based on: 50,000 U.S. force (3 bns. in MR 3), 80% RVNAF manning, 18 bn. reserve, and 19 bns. in Cambodia.

b/ Based on 60,000 U.S. force (3 bns. in MR 3), 70% RVNAF manning (varies by MR), 9 bn. reserve, and 21 bns. in Cambodia.

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-- On a nationwide basis, we will hold a 2.3 to 1 advantage in combat strength over the enemy.

-- In MR-1, the addition of RVNAF units will give us a 1.4 to 1 advantage despite continued U. S. withdrawals. As you may recall, our earlier study indicated that control gains in MR-1 could be made with a less favorable ratio than elsewhere in SVN. However, it remains to be seen whether the RVNAF units will be as capable of sustained control gains with a relatively low force ratio that could be greatly reduced at any time by unit movements from North Vietnam.

-- In MR-2, enemy strength is projected to increase, with a resultant GVN advantage of about 2 to 1. This mid-1972 ratio in MR-2 will be substantially below the level necessary if control losses are to be avoided. To avoid control losses, the GVN and our advisors are trying to concentrate forces in the heaviest populated areas.

-- in MRs 3 and 4, we will continue to maintain a strong advantage with force ratios that are certainly high enough to foreclose any significant loss of control and should foster continued progress.

On an overall basis, we face a military situation in South Vietnam that is better than we expected last year with the exception that our forces in MR-2 appear to be too weak to preclude the possibility of a loss in control. However, as discussed below, we face very substantial difficulties in further improving the RVNAF's capabilities and, given the approved pace of U. S. withdrawals, I think the main force situation may become more adverse in the long run unless a number of actions are taken.

The Control Situation

In light of this military situation, it is not surprising that the GVN has made considerable progress in its effort to control the countryside (see Table 2). Since last May,

-- The proportion of the rural population under GVN control had increased from 67% to 72% as of October.

-- The strongest progress was shown by MRs 3 and 4 in which control increased by about 10 percentage points and now stands at about 80 percent.

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-- In MR-2, there appears to be a control stalemate, with little progress shown over the last year even though the losses experienced early last year have been recouped.

-- In MR-1, we have experienced a substantial loss in control with an eight point drop since last May. The GVN now controls about 65% of MR-1's rural population.

In general, the DOD assessment predicts little change in these past trends.
To be specific:

-- Control nationwide is estimated to increase to 75-80% by mid-1972; a modest but significant increase.

-- Within the total, continued progress is forecast for MR-3 and 4 with control reaching 85% in each area. In MR-1 and 2, the picture is much less certain, but the prediction is that GVN control will either remain about constant or decline slightly.

The assessment devotes little attention to enemy capabilities or intentions for disrupting pacification through terrorism and other actions less than major offensives. It is not inconceivable that the enemy will devote more resources than we now foresee to disrupting pacification in MRs three and four before his infrastructure is further eroded in these areas.

On the whole, however, we face a control situation that is relatively good even though the enemy clearly could deny any further progress to us in the northern MRs where he has a relatively strong main force and the GVN a lower degree of population control.

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TABLE 2

GVN - Rural Control

	Control Status (%)		Dec-Oct Gain/Loss	Mid-72 Projected
	<u>Dec 70</u>	<u>Oct 71</u>		
MR 1	73	65	-8	60-65
MR 2	55	55	-	50-55
MR 3	69	79	+10	83-85
MR 4	<u>69</u>	<u>79</u>	<u>+10</u>	<u>83-85</u>
RVN	67	72	+5	75-80

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The Assessment of RVNAF Capabilities

The DOD assessment of RVNAF capabilities mirrors Secretary Laird's optimism. In particular, the severe manpower and leadership weaknesses of the RVNAF are simply glossed over.

After last spring's assessment, it was decided that rather than adding units to the ARVN, we should focus our efforts on raising the strength levels of the ARVN combat units from 72% to 90%. This would provide greater combat effectiveness and staying power without adding to the command structure or requiring added leaders, a scarce commodity.

Despite the President's directive, little progress has been made. For example:

-- By October, the average level of manning in the combat units was only 67% -- far below the 90% goal.

-- At the same time, RVNAF support and headquarters units were at or near full strength. In fact, 95% of the deficit in overall RVNAF manpower was concentrated in main force battalions. This is a curious situation in a war.

The GVN is apparently well aware of the problem. Indeed, a recent Vietnamese study (attached) paints a much starker picture of the situation than the DOD assessment. In brief, the ARVN reports that:

-- Troop replacements cannot meet needs, "causing combat strength to dip lower every day." The number of troop replacements in 1971 was 38% below 1970.

-- RVNAF casualties were up 11% and desertions up 10%. Desertions are a major factor in the combat capability of units.

There are no obvious or easy steps to remedy this problem, but at a minimum, some considerations should be given to:

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-- Increasing the draft. While the data are sketchy, it appears that only about half of the physically fit young men who reach age 18 are drafted.

-- Cracking down on deserters. There is still no evidence that the GVN is seriously attempting to enforce the desertion laws or to look hard for deserters. Aggressive efforts to round up deserters, coupled with stiff punishment, could make a major difference.

-- Putting available men in combat units. Despite the serious strength problems with combat units, headquarters and support units are essentially at full strength.

-- Limiting the term of service. The RVNAF still lack a "term of service," so once you are in for the duration (or until you are killed or seriously wounded). Setting a term (say five years) would not cost many men, but could reduce desertions since an eventual release date would be known.

The Leadership Problem

Many "Vietnam hands" consider leadership to be one of the key variables in Vietnamese military or government performance. When asked what one thing they would do if they could to improve the GVN's ability to cope, the answer is frequently "improve leadership." This conclusion is well substantiated by experience and analysis.

The most impressive case was the 7th ARVN division command change in January 1970. The former commander had been considered one of the worst in SVN and the division among the two or three poorest. The division's operational area was the northern Mekong Delta, just south of Saigon.

The U. S. 9th Division was in the same area and was the first unit withdrawn under the President's Vietnamization program. Serious problems became evident after the 9th left, but when a new capable commander of the ARVN 7th Division was appointed, the situation improved rapidly. The division was considerably more effective; for example:

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-- Enemy KIA increased sharply and kill ratio improved from 2-1 to 3.5 - 1.

-- The division increased the percentage of its time spent on offensive operations by about 50%.

-- GVN control in the area increased by 17% during the first half of 1970, compared to the countrywide improvement of 8%. VC/NVA strength in the area dropped sharply.

Replacing a few key ARVN leaders would have a very positive effect, but the effort should be broader. The control assessment section of the DOD paper indicated several areas where control declines were attributed to inept district or province chiefs. This is an area where MACV and the Mission often hesitate to act out of concern for Vietnamese sensibilities, but experience over the past six years shows that, unless we press the GVN repeatedly to replace poor leaders, they often fail to act.

Equipment

In general, we have provided the RVNAF ample weapons and equipment (too much according to many observers). Yet, there are some areas where we need to reassess our programs. They are:

-- Helicopters. MACV planning has assumed substantial residual U.S. helicopter assets will be available. This may be difficult if the residual force is small. It takes time to expand Vietnamese helicopter forces, but with imagination some steps could be taken. For example, many missions can be carried out by light observation helicopters (LOHs) rather than hueys (UH-1s). The LOHs take fewer pilots and maintenance men and are much cheaper so that it might be possible to expand RVNAF helicopter capabilities.

-- Light STOL Aircraft. An innovative Air Force plan to provide about 200 light STOL aircraft to the VNAF appears to be dead, at least for this year. These aircraft would not only be useful for close air strikes within SVN (releasing A-1s and A-37s for use in Cambodia or Laos) but could perform small resupply missions now carried out by helicopters. The STOL aircraft are cheap and easy to fly and maintain, thus avoiding the training requirements that limit our ability to give the Vietnamese more helicopters.

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Unless the White House actively supports the consideration of these and other proposals, I fear that very little will be done. DOD is preoccupied with the mechanics of withdrawal and conflict between the Services has limited the effectiveness of the limited efforts they have made. For example, the STOL proposal was about to be implemented when it was shot down by General Abrams. The basis for MACV objections was the fear that a STOL force would be used to justify reductions in SEA sortie levels, and jeopardize the Army's post-war plans for the armed helicopter.

If we are serious about continued improvement in RVNAF, we shouldn't let this sort of parochialism interfere with progress.

U.S. Force Levels

The latest Presidential withdrawal announcement brings to the fore a number of touchy issues regarding the make-up of any residual force as well as the composition of the forces we will have in Vietnam during the middle part of this year. There are two major areas of concern.

-- Advisors/Intelligence. Knowing what is going on within Vietnam and on the part of the North will continue to be of great concern.

-- RVNAF Support. In some areas, especially helicopter support, the RVNAF continues to be heavily dependent on the U.S.

With regard to advisors, we may be rapidly closing off our best source of knowledge as to what is really going on in the countryside. Advisors at the district level and with ARVN combat units provide the only reliable source of information in many cases. Yet, we seem to be mechanistically phasing out district-level advisors to preserve larger staffs at Military Region and Saigon level. In areas where control is firm, we may not need advisors, but in many areas, they should remain as long as we retain a major stake in Vietnam.

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The intelligence problem is similar. Each intelligence agency is proceeding on its own course, largely without central direction or guidelines. CIA is willing to try to make sense of this effort, but they need some direction from the NSC as to what we really need in the way of intelligence over the next few years and which aspects have priority. I will have a paper for you on this issue shortly.

Helicopters remain one type of support where the Vietnamese rely heavily on the U. S. The MACV 60,000 man force was structured especially to provide added helicopter support. However, I understand MACV now asserts that to meet the more rapid phase-down, the helicopters will have to go. This view may change as they assess the situation again, but pressure from the White House may be necessary to ensure that helicopters are given priority consideration.

Ground Interdiction

The major cross border efforts on the ground will be the conventional ARVN operations in Cambodia that began in 1970. Cross border raids from MR's I and II into the Laotian panhandle may also be possible against carefully selected, profitable targets. In addition, nine company-size commando units will engage in about ten interdiction operations each month during the dry season. If they achieve significant success, consideration will be given to expanding this type of unconventional force and operation.

Given there are two interdiction-related issues you may wish to discuss at the meeting:

-- Unconventional cross-border ground operations and whether this concept ought to be given more emphasis. The CINCPAC plan for nine company-size cross-border operations strikes us as no more than tokenism.

-- Conventional cross-border operations into South Laos. The Lao are anxious for this and General Sananikone is going to Saigon on January 14 in the hope of conferring with President Thieu on ARVN incursions in either the Saravane or Attapeu area. Earlier, Defense Minister Sisouk asked if we would support a three battalion ARVN operation in support of a forward defense of the Mekong town of Pakse.

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This Pakse defense project is probably a non-starter both logistically and legally. Besides, if Pakse were threatened, it would be more in the Thai than the GVN interest to come to the rescue. ARVN operations east of the Bolovens, however, can be justified in terms of Vietnamization (as was Lam Son 719) and merits more serious consideration. You may want to raise this possibility at the meeting.

The Meeting

Your talking points are prepared for you to lead the meeting. They focus the group's attention on the following issues:

- The intelligence assessment. The need to probe the CIA/DIA position to ensure it is solidly based and, in fact, widely accepted.

- The further actions required for RVNAF improvement. This would require more detailed evaluation of (a) RVNAF manpower, (b) leadership, and (c) equipment. The objective would be to develop options for the President's consideration over the next month or so.

- The U. S. withdrawal plan and residual force.. The need to evaluate the effects of various residual forces on the man force and control situations in June 1972. The levels examined should include (a) 60,000 men, (b) 35,000 men, (c) 25,000 men, and (d) 10,000 men.

I do not think there will be serious bureaucratic resistance to these efforts.

Your Book Also Includes:

- The CIA threat assessment.

- The DOD Control/Main Force Assessment.

- Secretary Laird on Force Improvements, including NSC Staff comments.

- A summary of the Vietnamese Study on RVNAF Progress and Problems

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